

Gordon Childe: memories and affirmation

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Thirty years after Childe's death we reviewed his persisting relevance (Gathercole 1987). Twenty-two more years have since passed, and we are pleased to see that his achievements have been reviewed again – in a special monograph (Saville 2009). Here Peter Gathercole admires the continuing modernity and ethical strength of his mentor's ideas, seasoning his reflections with some personal memories. Readers are invited to send us their own memories and tributes of Peter himself, who died on 11 October 2010 and will be much missed.

A special issue of the *European Journal of Archaeology* (Volume 12, Number 1–3, 2009) has been published recently, entitled 'Vere Gordon Childe – 50 years after'. Edited by Alan Saville of the National Museums of Scotland, it contains 10 papers by 11 authors originally given at a conference at Durham University in 2007, organised by Margarita Díaz-Andreu. The volume covers the range of Childe's archaeological interests – from prehistoric Europe to the Indus civilisation – as well as many of his philosophical and theoretical concerns, including Marxism. It also contains a bibliography of Childe's published writings compiled by Professor Terrence Irving and myself, which we had worked on for many years. We located 762 items between 1915 and 2008, our cut-off year, comprising books, monographs, articles, chapters, translations, reviews, letters and miscellanea. Subsequently, translations of seven of his articles (six in Polish, one in Dutch) and one review have come to our attention, and no doubt there will be more.

My own interest in Childe and his publications began in 1951 in my third year as a Cambridge undergraduate. Much of my previous National Service between 1947 and 1949 had been spent in Army Education in Egypt, where I had given lectures, mainly to conscripts (as I myself was), many of whom had little idea why they were there, and had little knowledge of the histories, cultures and politics of the Middle East. The smell of the Egyptian desert and memories of the antiquities I had seen in museums in Cairo returned to me in my encounters with Childe's writings at Cambridge.

Conscious of my limited archaeological knowledge, after Cambridge I took a postgraduate diploma at the London Institute of Archaeology, where I was taught, among others, by Childe. He was exciting. It has often been said that Childe was a poor lecturer; that he mumbled; that his sing-song Australian accent was disturbing; that he could appear abstracted and remote to students. Some of these comments I agreed with, but thought them pretty minor compared to the content of his teaching, which was up-to-date and well organised. Childe was stimulating, too, when suddenly he would break into a spontaneous

aside because new evidence concerning a well known site suggested a novel interpretation, or when a colleague, often overseas, had written concerning a new discovery which he felt should be passed on to us. The door of scholarship remained open. Going back in the evenings on a crowded bus to the cramped Hackney flat where my wife and I lived I often pondered the impact of Childe's single-minded teaching.

Childe expected students to keep up with his learning, and to devote much time and effort to his set essays. Though initially daunting, going through them with him was very rewarding, and his criticisms were constructive. He could be consideration itself. Once, when I asked for an extension for an essay's deadline because our son had been born early, and I was anxious to have more time to help my wife at home, he immediately asked if 10 days would be enough, inquiring if all was going well.

Memories of these and other experiences with Childe (for example, meeting him unexpectedly at a May Day rally in Trafalgar Square) persisted for years afterwards, especially during the decade from 1958 when I was teaching at Otago University in New Zealand. A course on the history of archaeology naturally involved much consideration of his place within the discipline, emphasised after the posthumous publication of an article in *Antiquity*, where he had charted his transition to an explicitly Marxist interpretation of prehistory:

'Now at last I rid my mind of transcendental laws determining history and mechanical causes, whether economic or environmental, automatically shaping its course. Incidentally I realised that the environment that affected a prehistoric society was not that reconstructed by geologists and palaeobotanists, but that known or knowable by the society with its then existing material and conceptual equipment. . . A society's scientific knowledge in turn is limited by its economic and social organisation. . . This completed my equipment for venturing upon a prehistory of Europe that should be both historical and scientific' (Childe 1958a: 73-4).

This was the genesis of his last book, *The prehistory of European society* (Childe 1958b).

Childe's archaeological works can be regarded as technically dated, his area specialisations parochial, his Marxism archaic. But I think that there is still much in his writings relevant to current archaeological and anthropological thinking today. In *Society and knowledge*, for example, he stressed that archaeology did more than preserve knowledge about the past:

'The knowledge embodied in the hand axes of the Old Stone Age was both useful and public. It enabled our remote precursors or ancestors to make serviceable tools such as they needed to supplement the deficiencies of their limbs and other bodily organs. And it was communicated to and transmitted by all the human beings who made hand axes for thousands of generations. Thus this knowledge was preserved – but not only preserved. It was also enriched and extended' (Childe 1956: 11).

Society and knowledge has always been to me an inspiring book, its message one of hope. Childe saw knowledge, including archaeological knowledge, as a guide to action. *'Indeed I might even venture to hope that the archaeological knowledge embodied in the present book may be useful in helping its readers to think more clearly and so to behave more humanly'* (Childe 1956: 127).

References

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